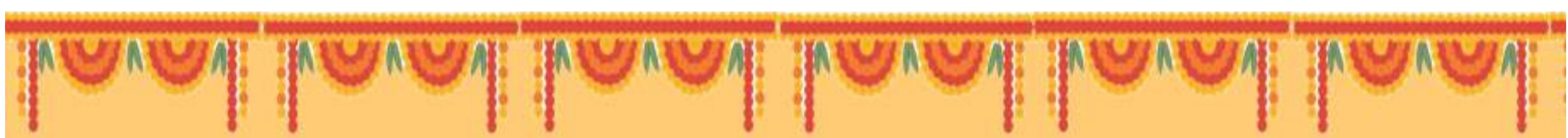


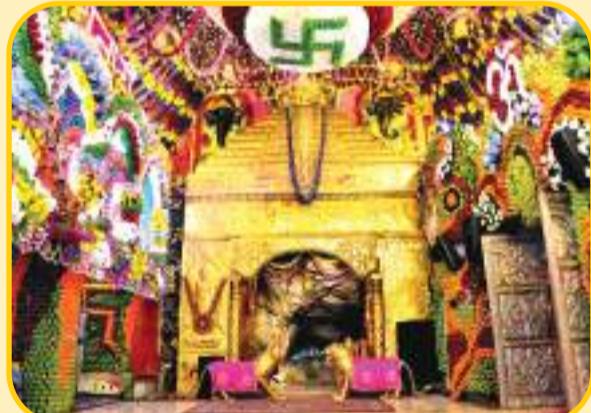
STATE TIMES

SUNDAY

Your Companion for a Funday



Pilgrimage to Holy Shrine of Mata Vaishno Devi



Like with majority of the old Shrines, it is not possible to ascertain when exactly the pilgrimage to it started. A geological study of the Holy Cave has indicated its age to be nearly a million years. Vedic literature gives no reference to the worship of any female deity, although Mountain range Trikuta does find its mention in Rigveda, the oldest of the four Vedas. The practice of worshipping Shakti, largely started in Puranic period. The first mention of the Mother Goddess is in the epic Mahabharat, when the Armies of Pandavs and Kaurvas were arrayed in Kurukshetra. Arjun, the Chief Warrior of Pandavs on advice of Shri Krishna; meditated Mother Goddess and sought her blessings for victory. This is when Arjun addresses Mother Goddess as 'Jamboonakta Chityaishu Nityam Samnihilataye', which means 'you who always dwell in the temple on the slope of mountain in Jamboo' (probably referring to present day Jammu).

It is also generally believed that Pandavs were the first to build the temples at Kol Kandoli and Bhawan, in reverence and gratitude for Mother Goddess. On a mountain, just adjacent to Trikuta Mountain and overlooking Holy Cave, are five stone structures, which are believed to be rock symbols of the five Pandavs. Perhaps the oldest reference of the visit of a historical figure to the Holy Cave is that of Guru Gobind Singh, who is said to have gone there via Purmandal. The old foot track to Holy Cave passed through this well-known pilgrimage centre.

Some traditions believe this Shrine to be the holiest of all Shakti-Peeths (a place where Mother Goddess, the Eternal Energy has Her Abode) since the skull of Mata Sati fell here. Others believe that her right arm had fallen here. But some scriptures do not agree with it. They do agree that at a place called Ganderbal in Kashmir, the right arm of Sati had fallen. Nevertheless, in the Holy Cave of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi, one finds stone remains of a human hand, popularly known as Varad Hast (the hand that grants boons and blessings).

While various versions of origin and legend of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi are prevalent, there seems to be unanimity on discovery of Shrine around 700 years back by the same Pandit Shridhar, at whose place Mata had helped in organizing a Bhandara (community meal). When she left amidst the Bhandara to escape Bhairon Nath, Pandit Shridhar is said to have felt as if he had lost everything in his life. He felt immense grief and gave up food or even water and closed himself in a room of his house, fervently praying for Maa Vaishnavi to reappear. It is then that Mata Vaishnavi appeared in his vision (dream) and told him to search her at the Holy Cave situated amidst folds of the Trikuta Mountain. She showed him the way to the Holy Cave and insisted him to break his fast. Pandit Shridhar then discovered the Holy Cave in the mountains.

Every time he seemed to lose the way, the vision of his dreams reappeared before his eyes and finally he reached his destination. On entering the Cave, he found a rock-form with three heads atop it. At that moment, Mata Vaishno Devi appeared before him in all her glory (another version says that the Supreme Energies of Mata Maha Saraswati, Mata Maha Lakshmi and Mata Maha Kali appeared in Holy Cave) and introduced him to three heads (now known as the Holy Pindies) in the rock-form along with various other identification marks in the Holy Cave. She blessed him with a boon of four sons and a right to worship her manifestation and asked him to spread the glory of the Holy Shrine all over. Pandit Shridhar then spent his remaining life in the service of Mata at the Holy Cave.

As per the legend, during the period when the Goddess was busy in annihilating the Asuras, her three main manifestations viz. Mata Maha Kali, Mata Maha Lakshmi and Mata Maha Saraswati got together one day and pooled their collective Tejas or spiritual strength. A stunningly bright light emanated from the place where the Tejas of the three manifestations coalesced and a beautiful young girl emerged out of this Tejas. The young girl asked them, "Why have I been created?" The Devis explained that they had created her so that she would live on earth and spend her time in upholding righteousness. The Devis added, "Now, go and take birth in the house of Ratankar and his wife, who resides in the southern part of India, and who are great devotees of ours. Live on earth. Uphold righteousness and evolve yourself spiritually so that you reach higher levels of consciousness. Once you have attained the appropriate level of consciousness you will merge into Vishnu and become one with him." They further blessed the girl. Sometime later, a very beautiful girl child was born to Ratankar and his wife. The couple named the child as Vaishnavi. The girl right from her childhood displayed a hunger for knowledge which was like a vortex and which no amount of teaching and learning could sufficiently satiate. Subsequently, Vaishnavi started looking into her inner-self for knowledge, and soon learned the art of meditation and realized that meditation and penance only could bring her close to her greater objective. Vaishnavi thus relinquished all household comforts and went deep into forest for Tapasya (meditation). Meanwhile, Bhagwan Ram, during his fourteen years of exile happened to visit Vaishnavi who recognized him immediately, not as an ordinary being but as incarnation of Bhagwan Vishnu, and immediately asked him to merge her into himself so that she could become one with the supreme creator. However Bhagwan Ram, knowing that it was not the appropriate time, dissuaded her by saying that he would visit her again after the end of his exile, and at that time if she succeeded in recognizing him, he would fulfill her wish. True to his words, Ram visited her again after emerging victorious in the battle, but this time he did so in disguise of an old man. Unfortunately, Vaishnavi was

unable to recognize him and was distraught. Upon this, Bhagwan Ram consoled her that the appropriate time for her being one with the creator had not come, and that time would come eventually in 'Kaliyug' when he (Ram) would be in his incarnation of 'Kalki'. Ram also directed her to meditate, and set up an Ashram at base of Trikuta hills, to elevate her level of spirituality so as to bless mankind and rid the poor and destitute of their sufferings. Only then would 'Vishnu' merge her into himself. Vaishnavi, immediately set-off for the northern part and after immobile hardships, reached the foot of Trikuta Hills. After reaching there, she set-up her Ashram there and started meditating.

As predicted by Bhagwan Ram, her glory spread far and wide, and people began to flock to her Ashram to seek her blessings. As time passed, Mahayogi Guru Gorakh Nath, who had a vision of episode between Bhagwan Ram and Vaishnavi in the retrospective time frame, became curious to find out whether Vaishnavi has been able to attain a high level of spirituality or not. He, therefore, sent his most able disciple 'Bhairon Nath' to find out the truth. Bhairon Nath on locating the Ashram, started observing Vaishnavi secretly, and realized that though a 'Sadhvi' she always carries bow and arrows with her, and was always surrounded by Langoors (apes) and a ferocious looking lion. Bhairon Nath was enamored by Vaishnavi's extraordinary beauty, and losing all good sense, he began to pester Vaishnavi to marry him. Meanwhile a staunch devotee of Vaishnavi, Mata Sridhar organised a Bhandara (Community meal) in which whole village and Mahayogi Guru Gorakh Nath along with all his followers including Bhairon were invited. During the course of Bhandara Bhairon Nath attempted to grab Vaishnavi but she tried her best to daunt him. On failing to do so, Vaishnavi decided to flee away into the mountains to continue her Tapasya undisturbed. Bhairon Nath however chased her.

The goddess after halting at present day Ban-ganga, Charan Paduka, and Adhikwari, finally reached holy cave Shrine. When Bhairon Nath continued to follow her despite the goddess trying to avoid a confrontation, the Goddess was compelled to kill him. Bhairon Nath met his ultimate fate when the Goddess, just outside the cave, beheaded him. The severed head of Bhairon fell with a force at a distant hilltop. Bhairon Nath on death realised the futility of his mission and prayed to the deity to forgive him. The almighty Mata (Mother Goddess) had mercy on Bhairon and gave him a boon that every devotee of the goddess would must have Darshan of Bhairon after having Darshan of Goddess and only then would the Yatra of a devotee be complete. Meanwhile, Vaishnavi decided to shed off her human form and assuming the face of a rock, immersed herself into meditation forever. Thus Vaishnavi, in the form of a five and a half feet tall rock with three heads or Pindies on the top is the ultimate destination of a devotee. These Pindies constitute the Sanctum Sanctorum of the holy cave known as the shrine of Shri Mata Vaishno Devi, which is revered by one and all.

